

Chapter 16

MAROONED

Lucy caught Wilbur up in her arms just before the floor vanished beneath their feet and they fell forward into Vincent's dream night. She was shocked by the frailty of Wilbur's once-solid little body. A chilly wind, as swift and tumultuous as Vincent's sky, rolled over them and blew off tufts of Wilbur's fur. They landed on one of the hills in the background of the painting. Lucy laid him gently to the ground. She looked down at herself and saw that she had on her blue dress with the zippered pockets, her white sweater, and silver boots. Wilbur winced with pain and his teeth chattered, as she covered him with her sweater.

He looked into her eyes and wheezed, "I am so sorry I failed you, Lucy. We are marooned inside a painting where there will never be any daylight."

“No, we’re not marooned,” said Lucy. “I’m going to get us home. You close your eyes and rest. I’ll be right back. I promise.”

If she could not find a way to fix Navigator, Wilbur would die and she would never see her parents again.

She needed Sam. Hugging herself, she screamed as loudly as she could, “Help me, Sam! Please hear me.”

His voice came to her, traveling across Vincent’s waving sky and lamp-like moon. “You were right, Lucy, crystals do have a life force.”

What does that mean? She thought. *And what does it have to do with fixing the Navigator?* She lifted the Navigator out of her pocket, holding it between her thumb and index finger. Moldy and limp, it sputtered and blinked, and then its light went out. She thought about how Sam had told her that quartz crystals were natural transmitters of radio frequencies. She had never asked Wilbur how the Navigator worked, maybe it did use some sort of crystal to power it. And maybe Sam meant that a

crystal could be the secret of tuning to the Dispatcher's frequency.

"Where can I find a crystal here?" she called.

But Sam had gone, leaving Lucy alone on the black hill.

Maybe she could find one in the village below.

"I'll be right back, Wilbur," she said and she ran down the hillside, her silver boots sinking into the purple furrows of dirt. She turned back to check on Wilbur. Vincent's crashing sky rose up like a sea monster behind her. His thumbprint was a huge smear on the horizon. As bright as they were, the moon and stars did not light up the hills or the little town in the valley below. When Lucy reached the village, she found that it was only a painted curtain. There must be real village beyond the veil, but it frightened her. It was where Vincent's nightmares lived.

She took a running start and jumped through the veil. Now she was in a place so dark that only a

sliver of Vincent's sky was visible. There were no cozy fireplaces or sleeping children tucked into bed. The houses were gaping, empty mouths without doors. She stood on a hard bumpy surface, slick with rain.

Groping through the soupy darkness, she called. "Hello? Is anyone here? Help me."

The thought of Wilbur alone on that cold hill made her insides hurt. He had been so kind to her and, for the first time she understood what he had meant when he said, 'We are taking the road to Lucy.' She also understood that he had risked his life for her.

Lucy felt her heart burst wide open. Gripping her sides, she bent over and howled. Her screams ripped through the air, and splashed on water. She straightened up and held her breath. If there was water close by, there might also be crystals because some crystal clusters grow in water. Spurred on by this thought, Lucy felt her way forward. Her hands hit a railing. Her footsteps were hollow under her feet. She was standing on a

bridge. At the end of the railing, she slid down an embankment and waded in.

She stood up to her ankles in water. Squinting into the blackness she prayed that there were no clawing hands to pull her under as she waded in deeper. She reached into the water and felt around on the sandy bottom for a crystal. Her hand stirred up the sand. Dozens of crystals threw beams of colored light to the surface. Lucy grabbed the closest one, shoved it into the front pocket of her blue dress, and sped up the hill.

Wilbur lay motionless on the ground. Soft tufts of his beautiful fur lay around him like a funeral wreath. His head was thrown back exposing his fragile throat and the corners of his mouth drooped. His perky ears, so expressive in life, fell limp on either side of his head.

With shaking fingers, Lucy grabbed the Navigator and pried off the back. A frazzled, scorched crystal lay in a compartment inside. The virus had damaged it beyond repair. She removed the old crystal, pulled the one she had found in the

water from her pocket, and inserted it into the compartment. Nothing happened. She waited. Still nothing happened. She ripped the crystal out of the Navigator and hurled it at Vincent's sky.

Inside the gaping hole where the Navigator's crystal had been, a rusty substance was spreading like fungus. Lucy scooped out as much as she could with her fingers. Then, she took off one of her socks and wiped it clean. What she saw reminded her of something familiar. A multitude of straight gold strips ran the length of the compartment. She was sure that these conductors were the secret to fixing the Navigator.

Her ears, fingers, and toes were freezing. Puffs of vapor issued from her mouth. She shivered in the cold wind that blew from the waves in Vincent's cobalt sky. It was so cold that icicles hung from Wilbur's fur. Her long hair hung in frozen locks around her shoulders. Her hands were so cold and numb that she stuffed them deep into her zippered pockets. Her fingers touched something small and glassy. She pulled it out and

could hardly believe what she was seeing; it was the crystal that had shone so brightly that morning in her bedroom. Its gold needles glittered and vibrated with life in her palm. This was her last chance to save Wilbur.

Her fingers were shaking so violently from the cold that she had trouble inserting the crystal at the right angle. Its needles had to line up with the gold conductors of the Navigator. When she had it in place, she snapped on the back of the Navigator, and held it in her palm, watching and waiting. Minutes went by and nothing happened. Then Wilbur moaned. Lucy knelt over him with his paw in her hands. The Navigator flickered red. Wilbur blinked blue. Then, for one glorious moment, the Navigator and Wilbur emitted a blinding emerald light that turned Vincent's sky green.

Lucy's face was the first thing Wilbur saw when he opened his eyes. The ice on his eyes melted. She leaned over him and saw herself reflected in his blue eye. This time her reflection was not at all blurry, but it was as sharp as a cut

crystal and her shadow was pointing in the right direction.

“You’re going to be fine,” she told Wilbur, kissing his ears. “I found the perfect crystal.”

Wilbur smiled and whispered, “You see? There is magic in you.”

The tufts of Wilbur’s old fur blew away and vanished in Vincent’s sky. New fur grew back thicker and shinier than ever. His barrel-shaped body assumed its balance and weight and his large ears flared like airplane wings. Best of all, his smile reached from ear to ear. Lucy had done it. She had saved his life and made it possible for them to go home. Wilbur reached a trembling leg around Lucy’s neck and kissed her forehead.

“See, Wilbur, you didn’t fail me,” she told him. “You did exactly what you promised to do when we first met in the woods. I’m back on the Lucy road.”

Wilbur told her, “That, and never forget that you saved my life.”

Lucy said, “Do I get some sort of certificate proving it?”

He smiled. “I will make one and keep it for you on my mantel piece. Now are you convinced of your ability to form original ideas?”

“Yes, Wilbur, I am.”

“Good,” he said, “then let’s go home.”

When Wilbur dropped the glowing Navigator into one of his fur pockets, a warm feeling surged through Lucy. The crystal she had discovered would keep him safe forever.